

**Lara Croft  
Tomb Raider**

in

**ZERO POINT**

by

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*This story takes place before the events of*  
Tomb Raider: Underworld

As it ploughs through the Earth's dense atmosphere, the alien spacecraft is engulfed by fire. The saucer-shaped vessel should normally descend gently, utilising the vast energy potential of its power source to negate the planet's gravity, but something has gone terribly wrong. The ship is spinning out of control and the ground is approaching with dizzying rapidity.

The crew of diminutive grey beings struggles bravely to correct their flight path, but it is to no avail. Their only hope is to abandon ship.

A huge lake is close by. It will be the perfect place for their escape module to submerge and await rescue. The alien crew deserts their duty stations and crowd into the central section of the saucer, where they each enter a waiting stasis chamber. Once sealed inside, the malfunctioning power core will hopefully keep them alive until a recovery ship can locate their emergency beacon.

Without a sound, the escape module drops from the main body of the spacecraft and plunges into the lake at several thousand miles per hour. The impact creates a huge wave that rips into the shoreline many miles away, engulfing buildings and ripping up trees. Slowly, the lifeboat sinks to the bottom of Lake Baikal, the water's dark, forbidding depths concealing it from the primitive world above.

The rest of the craft continues on its fiery trajectory before exploding high above the Tunguska forests of Siberia, laying waste to hundreds of square miles of frosty tundra.

Through Lara Croft's night-vision goggles, the Russian prison camp appeared almost deserted. The night was dark and moonless and her camouflaged outfit enabled her to blend in with the sub-Arctic landscape. She lowered the goggles and checked her personal data assistant, its tiny screen glowing weakly, yet dangerously, in the darkness. She shielded it from outside view with a gloved hand. According to the PDA, this was the right place.

She lifted the goggles back to her eyes again and noted that only a handful of guards patrolled widely-separated sections of the huge enclosure. The man she wanted to see was, according to her source, located in a concrete blockhouse near the centre. She could see the building, making a mental note of the American-style humvee parked beside it. Getting through the electrified, barbed-wire fence would not be a problem, nor would avoiding the security patrols. Her plan to get inside the blockhouse, however, depended upon one thing...

"Do not move, *tsipotchka*."

Lara felt the barrel of the standard issue AK-74M pressing lightly against her temple and she smiled inwardly.

"Perfect," she whispered.

Colonel Andrei Rosmanov glowered at Lara from beneath greying, heavysset eyebrows. She was tied to a chair in the centre of an interrogation cell with eight, heavily-armed soldiers standing around her.

"Really, Andrei, is all this manpower necessary?" she asked sweetly, her eyes flicking from man-to-man-to-window-to-door. The large window had been clumsily bricked-up and the door had been locked from the outside. Her gear was piled untidily on a table in the corner of the room and that, along with the chair on which she was sitting, were the only pieces of furniture.

Rosmanov rubbed the ugly scar that ran down the entire left side of his face.

"I would prefer not to have another one of these, Lady Croft," he growled. "And you shall address me as Colonel Rosmanov."

"You only have to ask, Andrei," she replied, ignoring his gruff command, "for symmetry's sake, of course."

Rosmanov walked around the wall of men, seemingly deep in thought and paying no heed to Lara's gentle provocation. He circled several times before stopping and staring at her from between the shoulders of the men in front of her.

"I have my sources in Moscow too. I know that you have come here for one of our prisoners," he snarled. "I would like to know who."

"Whom. You would like to know for whom I have come."

"Whatever. Tell me and I promise you that your remaining time in our beautiful country will be as brief as it is painless."

"Is that supposed to be an offer I can't refuse, Andrei?"

"No, Lady Croft. It is merely a statement of fact. You are going to die here. The manner of said death is your choice. Now, tell me the name of the man you have come here for."

"And then you can kill me whilst I am tied to this chair?"

"Something like that."

"Then thank goodness I've slipped my bonds..."

Suddenly and silently, Lara flipped vertically and, balancing with her hands on the back of the chair, spun around, both legs arcing and booted feet landing swiftly and cleanly on the jaws of eight surprised guards.

Before Rosmanov could react, she had grabbed a pistol from the holster of one of his fallen men and had it pointing directly at the colonel's head.

"I came here for you, Andrei," she said, smiling. "Now, hand me my backpack. You know what will happen if you call for help."

"You are a foolish girl," snapped Rosmanov, handing Lara her pack. "Whatever your clients are paying, I shall triple it."

"You're so predictable, Andrei." Lara pulled a large tube from the rucksack and tossed it to the Russian. On her request, he began applying its contents around the sealed window. "Thank you," she said when he had finished. She produced a thin, metallic rod and pressed it into the plastic explosive. "Now, get behind the table."

Rosmanov tipped the rickety, wooden table on its side and hunkered down behind it. Lara pressed a button on the top of the detonator and leaped across the room to join her former captor. They both placed their hands over their ears and opened their mouths.

A deafening explosion filled the cell with dust and debris and when Lara glanced above the charred tabletop, she grinned at the huge hole where the window had once been. Pulling on her gear, she grabbed Rosmanov and dragged him out of the blockhouse, just as the cell door burst open and guards flooded inside. They saw she was holding the gun to their commander's head and paused long enough for Lara to disappear into the darkness outside.

The humvee was waiting patiently for them and Lara bundled Rosmanov inside. She climbed in after him and deftly affixed a headset and microphone from her pack. A swish of her blade later, the vehicle was spraying mud and snow behind as she steered it towards the perimeter fence.

Crackling gunfire sent tiny geysers of earth spewing into the air and several shots clanged against the armoured bodywork of the military vehicle. Lara kept her foot hard on the accelerator, steering with one hand and pointing the pistol at the colonel with the other.

As they approached the fence, a line of soldiers appeared before them, their weapons raised, but Lara failed to slow down. The men scattered as she ploughed on through the fence, showers of sparks erupting all around and they watched, helpless, as the humvee disappeared into the forest.

"Zip, I have Rosmanov. Tell Ellen that I'm on my way."

The hummer bounced wildly across the uneven terrain and Lara had difficulty controlling the vehicle while keeping the colonel covered with the gun. He noted this and voiced as much.

"Thank you for pointing that out to me, Andrei," she said softly before driving the butt of the weapon into his temple, rendering him immediately unconscious. She threw the pistol out of the open window and grabbed the steering wheel with both hands. "Ah, that's much better."

Ellen Shearwater glanced at her wristwatch. Come on, Lara, she thought. Any minute she expected half the Russian army to descend on the clearing, where her helicopter was sitting with the engine running. Why the hell she agreed to help her old friend on this mission was beyond her.

Lara may have been an old friend and Lara may have saved her life, but this latest adventure was suicide: penetrate controlled Russian airspace, break into a secure prison camp and capture the commanding officer. It was crazy! Not to mention that they had to go deeper into controlled Russian airspace once they had him on board. She hoped that the radar scrambler installed by Zip would prevent any eager Russian missile batteries from locking onto them.

Who was paying Lara for undertaking this madness?

Ellen tensed as she saw the humvee enter the clearing and skid to a halt yards from the chopper, but it soon turned into relief when Lara climbed out and gave her a cheerful wave.

Lara walked around the vehicle and pulled open the passenger door. She bent down lithely and scooped up a handful of snow from the ground. Rosmanov sputtered back to consciousness as Lara shoved the ice-cold crystals into his face.

"Out you come, Andrei. It's time for a little helicopter ride."

Rosmanov glumly led the way to the chopper with Lara following, both of her own pistols drawn on the army officer. They clambered aboard and Ellen expertly worked the controls, piloting her aircraft bare feet above the treetops.

She glanced quickly at her GPS readout and informed Lara that they would be at their destination in a little over an hour, barring accidents or being blown out of the sky.

"Ellen, did you know that you're such a pessimist at times?" smiled Lara.

"I find it keeps me on my toes."

"You will both die," rumbled Rosmanov.

"Andrei, would you like me to knock you out again? No? Then I suggest you enjoy the view and keep your mouth shut."

"It is too dark to see anything."

"Then just keep your mouth shut."

Pokoyniki was a small town on the western shore of Lake Baikal. It was so small that the group of foreigners that had arrived recently had almost doubled its population overnight. The locals had watched suspiciously as these outsiders had built a camp for themselves just beyond the border of their settlement. Several large helicopters had flown in during the night and the town's mayor had been told in no uncertain terms to keep his nose out. A phone call to the regional capital had no effect and not a single unit of the armed forces had been dispatched to investigate what was going on.

Bob Partten pulled off his gloves and rubbed his hands together. Even the thick wool barely kept the Arctic chill at bay. He inspected the camp from his vantage point above the lakeshore, the rapidly-erected huts glinting in the first rays of the rising sun. His team had made him proud, setting up his base of operations faster than he had imagined. Not that he

congratulated them. They were paid to be the best and they were paid well, as were the hundreds of Russian officials who promised to 'look the other way' in regard to his corporation's activities in their country.

Partten Energy was rapidly becoming the world's leading supplier of power, gaining a reputation for developing unorthodox methods of energy generation. Unfortunately for the world, but fortunately for Partten, his methods were expensive, but with fossil fuels dwindling and the petroleum companies having to diversify, his business had a head start on the competition.

He glanced at his wristwatch. The only Russian he had not been able to pay off would be here soon. That was if Miss Croft had kept up her part of their bargain.

"Jones, has there been any word from Croft?"

A wiry, bespectacled man rushed towards his employer, almost slipping on the icy ground.

"Yes, sir. She should be here any moment."

As if on cue, a helicopter clattered into view over the trees and settled down outside the encampment. A squad of Partten's security force hurried to the chopper and formed into a cordon around it.

The door opened and Lara followed Rosmanov out, her pistols still trained on the colonel.

"Well done, Miss Croft," smiled Partten, pushing through the security detail to greet her. "I hope the colonel didn't prove too difficult a quarry for you."

"He's a teddy bear." She holstered her weapons and watched as several armed guards hustled Rosmanov away to a nearby hut. "I believe that I have fulfilled our end of the bargain. May I have the artefact?"

"Yes, the artefact," said Partten, rubbing his clean-shaven chin. "I have already paid you a significant amount of money, Miss Croft. More than enough to cover your," he looked to Ellen in the helicopter, "expenses. I think the inclusion of the artefact in our agreement should incur additional responsibilities from you."

"We had an agreement, Partten," Lara hissed. "The money and the artefact. I can have Alister fax the contract to you, if you like?"

Partten smiled grimly. "Alright, Miss Croft, I'll come clean. There was no artefact. I never had the remains of Pharaoh Akhenaten in my possession. The data I sent you was fabricated to get you to agree to join my little expedition."

"Then I shall be leaving."

Lara turned to walk back to the helicopter, signalling to Ellen to start the rotors spinning. Her keen hearing detected the unmistakable click of weapons being cocked and she stopped, her hands hovering close to her pistols.

"Don't be a fool," said Partten. "You'd be dead before a single bullet left one of your impressive guns. Just listen to

what I have to tell you and I am certain that you will willingly participate in my journey."

Lara nodded towards Ellen and the helicopter's blades began to slow down. She turned to face Partten.

"And if I do not choose to *willingly* participate?"

The tycoon smiled again, but did not reply and that was all the answer that Lara required.

Lara and Ellen leaned over a large sonar map of Lake Baikal. They were inside the main operations centre of Partten's camp. Rosmanov was on the opposite side of the large table and his gaze was equally riveted to the map.

"That looks odd," said Lara, pointing to an anomaly near the centre of the lake. "Whatever it is, it's huge, over three hundred feet in diameter and more than a mile beneath the surface."

"Good eyes, Lara - I may call you Lara?" said the American businessman. "Yes, that anomaly is what we have come here to investigate."

"I was part of the joint military team that started this survey over ten years ago," interjected Rosmanov, noting the Russian text in the bottom corner of the map. "This so-called anomaly was explained as an error in the sonar scanner."

Partten smirked. "And that is why the Russian navy almost killed a dozen submariners in an experimental DSV to retrieve it?"

The colonel grimaced. "Your intelligence is better than I thought."

"Of course it is. Now, I have spent a considerable amount of my own money and time developing a craft that will get us down there and bring back the answers to all our prayers."

"And that is?" asked Lara.

"Infinite free energy, of course."

"I don't follow," said Ellen. "Are you saying that you know what is down there?"

"The good colonel himself congratulated me on my intelligence. Of course I know what's down there!"

Rosmanov laughed out loud, startling everybody present.

"You have been listening to the crazy jabbering of the local people, have you not?" he guffawed. "Only an American would believe those wild stories of a hundred years ago."

"I still don't understand," said Ellen.

"Tunguska," whispered Lara, almost to herself.

Partten nodded and eyed the English adventurer's nimble form. "Excellent, Lara. Yes, Tunguska. In 1908, a terrific explosion laid waste to hundreds of square miles of taiga. Conventional wisdom told us that it was a meteorite or a flare from a comet detonating high up in the atmosphere, but it wasn't. It was..."

"Little green men!" squawked Rosmanov. "Bug-eyed monsters crashed to Earth a hundred years ago, leaving no evidence for us to find."

Partten jabbed his finger on the sonar tracing.

"There's the evidence, colonel, and I intend to retrieve it. Limitless free energy lies at the bottom of that lake. An alien power source that we cannot imagine, yet I will harness it."

"Harness it and hold the world to ransom?" said Lara coldly. "Free energy for you, but the price to the rest of the world will be whatever you make it."

"I am a businessman."

"I noticed."

A huge hole had been carved in the frozen water at the lakeshore and in the centre, bobbing lightly on the frigid water, floated Partten's submersible.

It was larger than Lara had expected, with enough room inside for a dozen people and their equipment. Partten was sitting in the co-pilot's chair alongside the vessel's captain, a former US naval commander called Eldridge. Lara and Rosmanov were billeted behind them and the remaining eight seats went to the rest of the energy baron's team, only two of whom were not members of the security detail.

Surprisingly, Partten had allowed Lara to keep her kit, including weapons, and a wireless data link with Zip and Alister. Lara's headset comprised of a radio microphone and a tiny digital video camera. There was also a direct radio connection with the operation's centre, where Ellen and Mr. Jones waited nervously for the return of their employers.

Rosmanov was not allowed a weapon, much to his chagrin. Partten explained that he trusted an armed Lara Croft more than an unarmed Rosmanov.

"Okay, everybody," said Eldridge through the ship's intercom. "All system checks are complete and we are ready to dive. Take a deep breath and hope it's not your last." He waited for dramatic effect. "Just kidding. Here goes."

The captain flooded the submersible's flotation tanks and the dark waters of Lake Baikal soon enveloped them. Eldridge flicked on the external lights, but little was visible in the icy gloom, save for the occasional omul fish swimming by in search of plankton.

"One hundred feet," reported Eldridge.

"Only five thousand five hundred to go," smiled Lara at the team sitting behind her. The two unarmed members smiled back, but the rest sat stone-faced, impassive as golems. She decided to strike up a conversation with the two that were smiling, one male and one female. "Lara Croft," she said, thrusting out a hand.

"Doctor Ben Gillespie, MIT," said the man, accepting Lara's outstretched hand. "Theoretical physics."

Lara looked to the woman, who was fidgeting with the buckle on her equipment pack. "And you?"

She looked up. "Oh, sorry." She shook Lara's hand. "Jessica Bridgman. Astrobiology. Terrible swimmer." She smiled weakly.

Lara smiled back encouragingly. "You'll be okay. We're well past the point where you need to swim, right captain?"

"That's right, Doctor Bridgman," chirped Eldridge. "Get out here and you'll be squished to fish food in no time."

Partten ordered everybody to remain quiet. He was paying them for a job of work, not to get acquainted. Lara stuck her tongue out at him when he returned his attention to the instrument panel in front of him.

Half an hour later, Partten reported that the anomaly was directly below them. Eldridge angled the sub so that they could get a good look through the spacious front viewport.

In the brilliant beams from the craft's lights, Lara saw a huge, curved disc, coated with grime, algae and various forms of bottom-dwelling plant life. Experience told her that whatever this was, it had been down here for, at most, a hundred years. She thought about Partten's belief that this was an alien technology and wondered if there were any living things left on board, or would this be a deep water tomb?

"I've found what appears to be an access port," said Partten.

"Well, that's handy," replied Lara wryly.

The expedition leader ignored her and instructed Eldridge to lower the docking collar and attempt a seal around the port. With a clunk and a hiss, the submersible stopped moving and the captain reported that a seal had been established.

Partten unbuckled from his seat and made his way to the rear cabin of the sub, closely followed by the other team members, except Eldridge, who remained in the captain's chair, monitoring the docking seal. A large, circular hatch, fitted with a locking wheel, dominated the floor of this room. Partten turned the wheel and grunted as he lifted the hatch open. Five feet below, the glistening, grimy hull of the alien vessel could be seen. A circular section was raised slightly and this was what Eldridge had taken to be an access port.

"You know, Bob," whispered Lara into Partten's ear, "while I find all of this terribly exciting, I'm pretty sure you don't have a key for that door."

Partten motioned to one of his men, who approached with a cutting torch. "You were saying?"

"Good luck," smiled Lara.

Ten minutes later and the cutting torch had made no impression on the hull of the alien ship, except for clearing it of seaweed and algae.

"Perhaps we should knock?" suggested Lara innocently. She quickly dropped down into the docking collar, landing with a clang on the shimmering, metal surface. Pulling her gloves off, she ran her fingers around the edge of the circular impression. Nothing, she thought, a little frustrated. Then she noticed another feature beside the port: a series of four, small indentations, just large enough for slender digits to enter.

She slipped her fingers into the holes and held her breath. Nothing seemed to happen at first, but then the circular section began to shimmer. The metal liquefied and retreated into the body of the craft, leaving only a large, dark hole. Air was pulled from the submersible into the hole, suggesting that it had, indeed, been an airlock of some kind.

"See?" Lara called up to the crowd peering down at her. "We only had to knock."

A dozen flashlights clicked on and the team found themselves in a long, curving corridor. The conduit was about eight feet in height, the same in width and appeared to follow the outer curve of the spacecraft.

Partten took the lead and decided arbitrarily on a direction to go. Lara and Rosmanov found themselves in the middle of a gaggle of security men, being pushed along as they followed the corridor to wherever it took them.

"I do not know even why I am here," grumbled the colonel to Lara. "I was part of the original survey, yes, but I had no knowledge of this," he raised his hands, "place."

"It looks like we are in the same boat, Andrei, so to speak." Through a gap in the surrounding bodies, she saw what appeared to be a doorway approaching. Her fingers gently caressed her pistols. "I just hope we aren't going to be thrown overboard."

The team stopped by the open, triangular portal and one of the men peered inside. He nodded that the way was clear and they filed through. As they did, a gentle hum began to emanate around them and Lara could feel power surging beneath her boots. Soft, green lighting began to glow all around and they saw that they were in a vast chamber that must have occupied the major proportion of the ship.

At the centre of the space was a large, octagonal object that, despite appearing monumental, must, Lara thought, have been part of the ship's mechanism. At the centre of the polygonal plinth was a glowing, green crystal, perfectly-formed into a geometrical ball.

"It's a buckyball," explained Gillespie, obviously in awe at what he was looking at. "It's a buckminsterfullerene, named after their discoverer, Richard Buckminster Fuller. They are incredibly strong. I think it contains the power core for this ship. Only a buckyball could contain it safely."

Lara was listening intently to the explanation, but her attention was drawn by what occupied the inner wall of the chamber. "Did you hear that, guys?" she said into her headset.

"Sure did, Lara," replied Zip, his voice slightly distorted. "The signal's a little mashed, but you are a mile underwater in an alien spaceship. I'm surprised we can hear you at all. I'm even more surprised about the video feed we're getting. It's a little fuzzy, but I can see what you see."

"What has Alister dug up?" She was still looking at the objects along the walls.

"According to my, admittedly hasty, research," said Alister Fletcher in his clipped, English accent, "what we could be dealing with here is a zero point module."

"I've heard of those."

"Yes, they've become all the rage in science fiction, apparently."

"Well, this isn't science fiction, Alister," she smiled, staring into the passive face of an extra-terrestrial inside its stasis tube. She raised her hand to the clear canopy and gently traced the contours of the alien's face. Large, closed eyed dominated an over-sized, teardrop-shaped head. There was a hint of a mouth and only small holes where ears should have been. Its skin was a light, pinkish-grey. So like us, yet so different, she thought to herself. So peaceful.

"Quite," interrupted Alister.

"Get away from there, Miss Croft!" shouted Partten, indicating to two of his men to escort Lara away from the stasis tubes that lined the entire inner wall of the compartment.

"What happened to 'Lara', Bob?"

"Exactly, what will happen to Lara if she keeps sticking her nose where it is not required?" He looked to Jessica. "Doctor Bridgman, check those tubes and make sure we're not going to be inundated with aliens any time soon. Doctor Gillespie, you work out how to get that module out of the ship without blowing us all to hell and back."

Lara backed away from the stasis tube, smiling at Jessica and glowering angrily at the two men who tried to escort her away.

Doctor Bridgman held up a hand scanner and ran it up and down the tube. She stared at the data on the screen for several seconds, shocked by what her readings told her.

"They're alive!"

"So?" snapped Partten. "Are they going to wake up?"

"Well, no, I don't think so. Not unless you know the commands to deactivate the tubes."

Lara backed away from Partten's squad, close to the doorway where Rosmanov was standing, curiously quietly. "Zip, what would happen to these aliens if the zero point module was removed?"

"At a guess, I'd say that they all would die." There was a lengthy pause. "Lara, what are you thinking?"

Her hands went to the pistols strapped to her thighs, only for them to be whipped away suddenly. She spun around to see Rosmanov grinning at her, clutching her trademark weapons.

"I don't think so, Lady Croft," he whispered. "At least not yet." He nodded towards the nearest stasis tube and handed Lara her guns.

Following his gaze, Lara noticed that beside one of the pods, the one closest to the door, was a small panel with four indentations, similar to the one beside the airlock hatch. She grinned at Rosmanov.

"You beautiful, hairy Russian, you," she purred. "Zip," she continued in an almost imperceptible whisper. "Zip, can you hear me?"

"Barely. I'll turn up the gain."

"Is that better?"

"Much. What's the problem?"

"I can't allow Partten to disconnect these pods from the energy source. It would be cold-blooded murder."

"What do you want from me?"

She smiled. "I need you to hack into the US Freebird satellite network."

"Oh, is that all?" There was a distinct tone of sarcasm in his voice. "Hack into the world's most secure military system? Anything else?"

"Use the Freebird's antennae to broadcast everything we've done here out into space."

"Huh?"

"Just do it, Zip. If I'm right, we can save the crew."

"And if you're not?"

"Zip, I'm always right, silly!"

Lara smiled up at Rosmanov. He grimaced, knowing what she was going to ask of him.

"Andrei, I'm going to need a distraction. Quite a large one, if you wouldn't mind." She edged towards the stasis tube by the door.

Jessica was continuing with her scans at the far side of the chamber. Partten and his men were watching all around, all of them appearing nervous. Well, it's not every day you find yourself in an alien spaceship, thought Lara.

Rosmanov walked up to Partten and stared him straight in the face.

"Partten, we need to talk."

"Go away, Andrei. We'll talk later."

Rosmanov grabbed the businessman by his collar and lifted him from the deck. In an instant, a dozen weapons were trained on the huge Russian.

This was Lara's chance, she slipped her fingers into the panel by the door and ducked out of the chamber before the portal sealed.

Rosmanov glanced over his shoulder, but held on tightly to Partten.

"Rosmanov, if you don't put me down," grimaced Partten, "my men will cut you in half."

The colonel smiled and set him down. "Oops."

Partten scanned the room quickly, saw the sealed doorway and shouted at his men. "You idiots! Croft has gone!" He grabbed a weapon from one of his men and aimed it at Rosmanov's left eye. "What is she doing?"

The Russian shrugged. "I have no idea, *Bob*, but you know Lara Croft. I'm sure it will be impressive."

Lara ducked into a dark corner as two of Partten's soldiers dashed by.

"Alister, there's one thing bothering me about this," she whispered.

"Just one?"

"Why didn't anybody come and rescue these people? Correct me if I'm wrong, but wouldn't unlimited energy mean instant communications and transport across infinite distances?"

"In theory, yes. Obviously, our technology is nowhere near that level of sophistication."

"So, what is this ship still doing here?"

"At a guess, I'd say they had some form of emergency beacon," interjected Zip. "Maybe it malfunctioned or was damaged when the ship crashed."

Lara smiled thinly. "So they're not perfect, then, despite the technological advancements."

She peered out of her hiding place and slipped into the corridor. She entered another chamber, this one small and cramped with dim lighting. Zip chattered excitedly and asked Lara to back up. Lara found herself looking at a small console with a single, dark display.

"What is it, Zip?" she asked.

"That might be the emergency beacon. See the power lines leading into it?"

"I'll take your word for it. Anyway, it certainly looks broken. I wonder..."

Alister interrupted. "Lara, if you can get that beacon working, then the aliens would be rescued in no time at all."

"Er, do we really want that? I mean, with all of us being on board?"

Zip explained that repairing the beacon would be much faster than uplinking to the Freebird satellite, not to mention that our signals only travel at the speed of light, taking years to reach even the nearest star system.

"Look, guys, as much as I don't want to see these aliens die at the hands of Bob Partten, I equally don't want to live out my days on Alpha Centauri!"

"Then, as soon as we get this thing going, you'd better hot-foot it back to the sub," chuckled Zip.

Lara sighed and kneeled down beside the console. Following Zip's expert guessing, she opened the machine and fumbled about inside. After several minutes, the display on the console flickered into life and alien text began scrolling across the screen.

Lara stood and stared at the screen. As she watched, the text was replaced by a graphical image that was unmistakable.

"A ship's on the way," said Lara. "Time for us to leave."

Eldridge was sitting in his chair in the submersible, checking and rechecking his instruments when brilliant light flooded the cabin. Suddenly, the DSV shook violently and a warning light told him that the airlock seal with the alien ship was in danger of failing. Another display had him on the radio to Partten.

Partten picked himself up from the floor of the alien chamber and looked around as the ship shook and rumbled.

"What the hell is going on?"

Jessica checked the aliens in their stasis tubes and sighed with relief.

"They're all still asleep."

"So, who's moving the ship?" shouted Partten.

"I might have something to do with that."

Everybody whirled to see Lara standing by the doorway, her pistols aiming at Partten. The security goons all raised their weapons.

"I don't think so, chaps. Pop those guns down on the floor or your boss will become a permanent resident here."

Partten told them to do as she said and asked Lara what she had done. Lara explained about the emergency beacon and surmised that some form of extra-terrestrial tractor beam was pulling the ship out of the lake.

"At least, that's what Alister has just told me," she smiled. "So, I think we should get back to Mr Eldridge, don't you think?"

Partten pointed to the buckyball. "I'm not leaving without that crystal!" He clambered up the central plinth and struggled to reach for the zero point device.

The ship rocked violently again and Lara grinned as all of the soldiers rushed by her as they headed back to the submersible. Jessica and Gillespie followed them. Only Lara, Rosmanov and Partten remained. Rosmanov was smiling at Partten, who kept slipping from the monolithic platform, finding the whole situation hugely amusing.

"You go, Lara. This fool wishes to remain. I will stay with him. Maybe we will meet again, yes?"

"Andrei, you can't stay. Not for *him*." She nodded towards Partten, who once again slid down the plinth to the floor of the chamber as the ship rocked once more. "You have no idea what's going to happen."

"Lara!" Zip's voice was loud in her headset. "You're almost at the surface. Get out now!"

"*Da svidAn'ya*, Lara Croft." Rosmanov smiled and nodded towards the door.

Lara sighed and nodded in return to the colonel. Then she was running down the corridor as fast as she could. She cried out as the submersible detached and freezing water flooded into the corridor.

A huge, shimmering, disc-shaped craft hovered silently above the dark waters of Lake Baikal. From its centre, a beam of iridescent light cut into the icy depths, drawing the downed escape craft into the sky with a spray of arctic foam. Once free from the lake, the craft increased altitude rapidly, vanishing into the body of the gargantuan mothership.

A brilliant pulse of light illuminated the landscape for a second and the ship was gone. The frothing waters of the lake calmed to reveal the submersible bobbing on the surface and a shivering figure standing atop it.

Lara Croft struggled to her feet. Her body wracked with cold, she hammered on the hatch with the butt of one of her pistols. It opened and a surprised Eldridge blinked up at her.

"Th-thanks for w-waiting!"

"Jesus! Get in here, Croft!|"

Lara clambered inside the DSV and gratefully accepted a thick towel from the captain.

"I thought you, Rosmanov and Partten were staying behind! We only just detached before the ship broke the surface. What happened to the others?"

"Andrei and Bob have gone where no man has gone before." Lara Croft smiled wanly and buried herself in the warm towel.

THE END

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